

THE BLIND COMMANDER

Marion Thorton

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The Blind Commander

As weird a drama as any war ever produced: the adventures of a U-boat that strayed from the beaten track

By Marion Thornton

Illustrated by Courtney Allen

THE North Atlantic, stretching away in ruffled silver to the Pole, seemed by the half light of April dawn to be a particularly peaceful gray background for the gulls and stormy petrels that arched by on silent wings. Nowhere was there a hint of danger on the whole lustrous prairie or in the tattered ribbons of mist trailing to the dimness of the far horizon.

Yet Jeremy Lane, chief officer of the *Borealis*, kept his watch with nervous precision, striding the bridge with his sharp glance everywhere. Experience had taught him; and the lesson was recent enough to be carved quite unforgettably in his mind.

Almost a year had passed, he reminded himself, since he had been adrift in a lifeboat on these very waters, watching the freighter which had carried him thrust her torpedoed stern under the surface and take a final, sighing plunge to the depths. The Armistice had removed the hazard of U-boats from the path of ships taking this route, but the ice—which had so harassed the weary survivor—was still to be reckoned with, and a ghostly white berg, sighted just at twilight the night before, had stabbed Jeremy Lane with unreasoning terror.

Shivering a little, he glanced in at the wheelhouse clock. Scarcely half an hour had dragged by since his watch had begun. Three hours and a half to go before relief. Across rolling water the mists were swirling and dissolving against a palely glowing eastern sky. Close in to the *Borealis*, an odd, streaking white wedge against the gray water caught his eye, and he brought the glasses to bear on the point just off the port bow, adjusting focus with curiosity.

Lane had been on the bridge of the torpedoed wartime freighter, and he had seen the telltale fan of lacy water breaking away from the upright tube of the marauder's periscope just before the torpedo was fired. But for the barest fraction of a second he stared down uncomprehendingly from the bridge of the *Borealis*, refusing to credit what the binoculars told him—that at a point not four hundred yards away was an exact duplicate of that first melting wake.

A submarine, driving dead for the *Borealis*! A submarine, submerged, in a trade route? Incredible! Yet he saw the vertical black stick at the tip of the wedge, and the glinting eye of the lens bearing down as though intent on ramming the ship—then, abruptly, they were no longer there to be seen. They had disappeared in a pluming tower of water that rocketed into the sky with a muffled roar like the roll of far-off drums. Aghast, Lane stared at the shattered black bow of a submarine that leaped convulsively into the air and seemed to hang suspended for a long instant before it knifed downward into the foaming waters.

The awful finality of the plunge shook him awake. Wheeling to the engine-room telegraph he caught a glimpse of

the quartermaster's stupefied face gazing from behind the window of the wheelhouse. He spun the indicator to "Stop. . . Full Astern," rang the captain's bell. Carried by her momentum, the *Borealis* was sweeping past in spite of suddenly reversed engines, but Lane could see the swirling gray vortex that alone remained to mark the point of the tragedy falling astern slowly and more slowly until the ship had settled to a dead stop.

The captain reached the bridge, struggling into his uniform coat and blinking against the slanting early light. A few swift questions and he had the ship cutting a wide, clean arc. "Will we find survivors, Mr. Lane?" he asked finally.

"It's a toss-up, sir. She seemed to split forward, and a few men in the after-end might have been thrown free. But the explosion was terrific. Lord—it was a nightmare to see that black thing leap!"

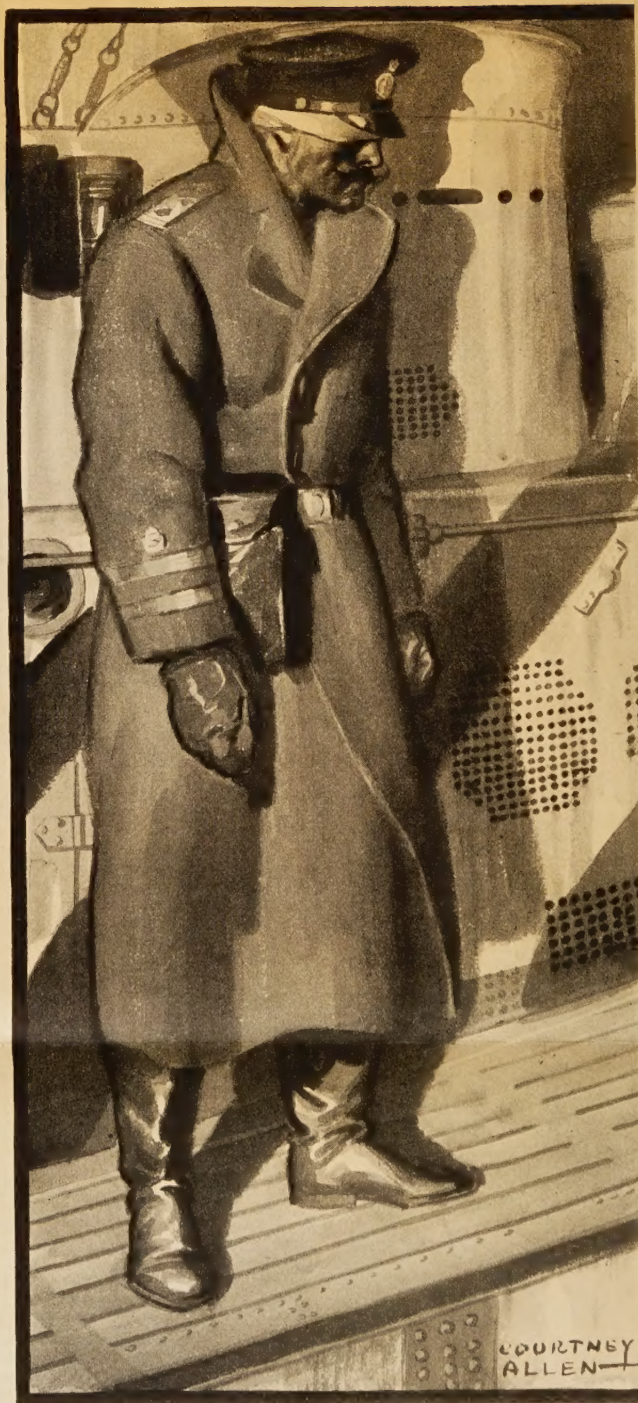
THE ship's bell chimed two silvery strokes. The waves had quieted now at the point where the iron fish had plunged to oblivion, and as the *Borealis* cut closer, Lane made out a vast iridescent flower leisurely unfolding petals to show sparse black stamens. The captain had sighted it at the same instant. "Oil—and men! Order the port boats ready, Mr. Lane. Number One boat will go first, and have them look smart."

Lane gave the orders, and watched the lifeboat strike water and run like a many-legged bug over the swells until it reached the oil-stained area where it hovered in eccentric circles, its crew lifting one limp figure and another. But no signal came for a second boat. That meant the single lifeboat had room and to spare for all the men who were left on the surface. The rest of the crew—and forty was no unusual number to man a submarine—must have gone down with the twisted wreckage of their ship. The captain turned to the bridge ladder. "I'm going on the boat deck."

"Right, sir," Lane's eyes wandered again, sickly, to the rescue boat, saw it complete its brief cruise and begin an anxious, bobbing return to the side of the mother ship.

In a dead hush the boat drew alongside, the men catching a rope dropped from the deck of the *Borealis*. Not a sound reached Lane's ears but the groaning of the winch as the falls grew taut and the lifeboat rose bodily to the level of the passenger deck. There, in the half light, he saw the first body lifted over the rail. The men seemed to be going about their work in a sort of nightmare, working soundlessly, but with feverish haste.

Another body and another followed the first, until Lane had counted nine. Then the lifeboat was hoisted to its cradle and the *Borealis*, circling forward on her crescent course, pointed her bow again toward Liverpool. . .



At the end of the long hours of his watch, Lane heard a clipped report of the grim affair between decks.

THE third officer, coming on relief, passed him the word in undertones that the victim ship had been German. Of the nine men brought aboard one retained a spark of life that might flicker out at any instant. Every one of them looked like a skeleton—starved, or he was no judge.

"Another mystery of the sea," said Lane soberly.

"You'd never believe human beings could be so brittle thin! They're like parchment. And the commander—but you'll have to see him for yourself."

"What about him?"

"Blind, for one thing. For the rest—I don't know. You'll understand when you see him—It must have given you a bad half minute to see that periscope? Like old times, eh?"

Lane nodded. "That's putting it mildly," he said, and went below. The sick-bay door was bolted, and the doctor himself admitted him in answer to his knock. They were alone in the room; just the two of them, and a line of emergency cots, each holding an inert body.

"I put everyone else out," the doctor warned. "You can stay if you don't get underfoot."

Lane made no reply. He stood staring at the cot ahead of him, where a

Under Two Flags

Since 1884 no ball team has ever been able to win the world series three consecutive years. But Connie Mack, with several miracles to his credit, believes his Athletics can change all that this fall

By Grantland Rice

IT IS always pleasant news to learn that a man past fifty who has slipped from the heights of fame can start all over again and climb back just as high. It has been just seventeen years since Connie Mack dismantled his old 1914 Athletics and left the top floor to live in the cellar. When fourteen years had passed and Mr. Mack, then past sixty, was still struggling to win another pennant, the feeling became general that the Philadelphia veteran would never make the grade. Now his rivals are hoping that Connie will dismantle this present outfit and lift the blockade again. It's all right to come back, but seven American League opponents and the Cubs and Cardinals feel that it can be overdone.

According to the official records, dating back to 1884 when Providence faced the Metropolitans, no ball club has ever won three world series championships in three successive years. Cubs, Giants, Athletics, Yankees and others have bagged the big money twice. But they all have been halted at the third charge.

But here is the gaunt shadow of Connie Mack again falling across the autumn landscape. And that drumming noise in the distance indicates that the big bats of Cochrane, Simmons and Foxx are tuning up again. These bats have been well tuned up for the last three years. They are always dangerous and when you stick them back of the pitching of Grove, Earnshaw and Walberg, you can understand why the Athletics are so hard to beat.

They are not invincible. They can be taken. But taking them is the toughest job baseball has known in some time. The National League is keener than usual to have

Gabby Street's Cardinals break up the Athletics' stampede on this next occasion. The older circuit hasn't won a world series since 1926. Furthermore, the older circuit has won only three of the last nineteen world series games played against the Yankees and Athletics. This isn't so hot for the partisans of the Heydler order. In fact they are all steamed up about it.

The Yankees threw in a murderous machine against them, headed by Ruth and Gehrig, and then the Athletics came along with a combination even better equipped. So it must be admitted the National League's pennant winners have been forced to tackle opposition well above the ordinary run of world series strength. They have had to face two of the strongest clubs baseball has ever known, and one of them is now mobilizing to march on St. Louis and the Cardinal camp once more.

What chance have the Cardinals to break the spell? They have a better ball club than they had a year ago. They have a star catcher in Wilson, a strong pitching staff in Grimes, Haines, Derringer, Hallahan, Rhem and Johnson. They have a good infield, unusually strong around second with Frisch and Gelbert. They have a fast, good-hitting outfield and they have a team that has had more than its share of world series experience.

It May Be Different Now

Last fall the Athletics caught Jim Bottomley, one of the best of the Cardinal hitters, half sick and in a slump. That made a big difference, for Bottomley had many a chance to drive in a needed run which he couldn't take. The Cardinals can call on the pitching they need, with more than enough reserve power in case of heavy firing. They can play a lot of baseball and they will get all the wild and woolly support any city can give when those excited Mid-Westerners break loose with the call of the wild. There is nothing suppressed about St. Louis fans.

But the Athletics also are stronger than they were a year ago. Then they had to work Grove and Earnshaw day after day and then keep them pitching through most of the series. Now Rube Walberg and his smoke-ball have returned to the scene and a young man named Mahaffey has been a world of help. So neither Grove nor Earnshaw has been crowded as much this season and they both will have more help when the heavy firing starts.

This brings us to Simmons, Cochrane and Foxx. Here are three of the most dangerous players from the offensive angle that ever broke up ball games.

Who can forget Mickey Cochrane's long volley against Grimes last fall? Who can forget the crash of that home run from the bat of Jimmy Foxx at St. Louis that practically ended the series and killed off

the last Cardinal hope? No pitcher can tell at just what moment the big blast will go off, wrecking the ball game, when any one of this trio wanders up with a war mace in his hands.

World's records are not broken every week. In the past forty-seven years, no ball club has ever won three of these championships in a row. There is a reason for this. Few have ever had the chance. The few who did were usually beginning to crack up in the third year.

But beyond all this no team was ever as well equipped to win three world series championships in a row as the Athletics are at this date. In the first place there is the character of Connie Mack and his two aides, Eddie Collins and Kid Gleason, to keep the flame and the vital spark alive. No manager in the history of the game has ever had the complete confidence and respect of his men that Connie Mack has. There is something in the face of the man, in almost every word and deed, that must be an inspiration to his players and his assistants.

Anything, as every fan knows, can happen in a short series. The breaks can be massed one way and upset all calculations. The Cardinals are no set of staggering derelicts, waiting to be shoved upon the backs of their necks. They have precedent working their way. But they have a great ball club to stop before the National League can break again into the winning ways of world series baseball play.

Any team that can suppress this delegation of Connie Mack's in a big-money classic is entitled to all the glory it can carry. Everything considered, it looks as if it would be a great year for the mobs that follow the series.

"Gabby" Street (left), manager of the St. Louis Cardinals, and Connie Mack of the Philadelphia Athletics

Wide World

Acme



With the freighter riding there at anchor, ready to take us off, it was a supreme test of the Kommandant's power that he could hold us at all

titanic figure lay. The pallor of death and the hollowness of starvation had left their unmistakable imprint on a granite-gaunt face whose eyes were covered with a sodden rag of bandage, but about the whole body clung an unconquerable, unexplainable sense of power.

Here, then, was the commander.

The man had gone to his death wearing the dress uniform of a submarine officer in the service of His Imperial German Majesty, and the tattered rags of blue, threaded with tarnished braid, contrasted oddly in their dignity with the dirty active-service suits worn by the other victims.

Looking down at the great body, Lane wondered not at all at the third officer's awe. There clung a sense of dominance, intangible but immense, that left the American groping for some explanation

of the ironic fate that seemed to have brought this man through a gehenna of suffering, only to blow him out of life at the end.

He heard the doctor moving about, and turned to see him at work over the end cot, where an unkempt brown head showed against the white of a pillow.

ODD, Lane thought; he had forgotten the living survivor in the mysterious presence of the dead. "Any hope for him?" he asked.

The doctor looked up. "None. He may live for an hour or so, or he may not. But there's nothing more I can do."

Drawing closer, Lane studied the pale face pityingly. Allowing for years added by a stubble of brown beard and deep-etched grooves of suffering, he found it the face of a young man. A boy perhaps twenty-five, who must have been

through more agony than a lifetime should hold.

A rap at the door drew the doctor away, and when he returned he was swearing tonelessly. "It's a hurry call," he answered Lane's questioning glance. "I'll have to go."

"I'll stay with the boy. What's to be done?"

"Not a thing. Just be on hand. It's even money he won't pull through to consciousness at all, but if he does—didn't you say once you knew German?"

"Yes."

"Good. Humor him. Give him anything he may want. He hasn't long to live at best."

Locking the door behind the doctor, Lane turned back to the cot and stood staring down at his charge. At that instant, the boy opened his eyes.

the boy's pupils dilated and horror struck like a whiplash across the still face. Instantly the pale lips were forming words, and the American bent swiftly to hear a desperate wraith of a voice moaning, "*Lieber Himmel!* I could not even—die!"

"Steady, boy, steady! What's the objection to life?"

The haunted eyes met his uncomprehendingly. "I thought I would die with the others. God knows I thought I would die!"

"There—of course you did."

"Did anyone—else live?"

RELUCTANTLY, Lane shook his head.

"It is better so. If only I could have died, too! *Ach*, if only I could have died!"

Looking down at him, Lane tried to imagine the suffering that could have touched a young voice with such real hysteria. Almost involuntarily he asked, "What sort of hell have you men been through?" and cursed himself as soon as the words were out.

But the German gave no sign that the question stung. Instead, it seemed to Lane that his eyes lost a little of their haunting terror, as though he desperately wanted a confidant. "Every sort," he whispered brokenly. "Every sort, on sea and land. That was what made me do it..."

"Easy, young fellow! I shouldn't have asked."

"But I want to tell you, *mein Herr*. I want somebody in all the world to know I couldn't help what I did..."

"Yes, yes. Later. But don't try to talk now, boy."

The blue glance swept him as though he were invisible. "It was something stronger than I was that made me do it..."

Lane remembered the doctor's order—"Humor the boy." Gently, half unwillingly, he suggested, "Tell me."

"Thank you, *mein Herr*. I am glad you are rather young. I think it will be easier for you to understand—I had my nineteenth birthday aboard our U-boat." It was a statement, with no answer expected, and Lane honored his silence until the thin voice went on again bursting, as though the agony pent within him could not be contained. "I have never liked this war, but I tried to be a good soldier for the Fatherland. I don't know what it is—perhaps I am a coward. Or perhaps no one who is young really enjoys killing others..."

"I came out of training school just a year ago, with a lieutenant's commission and orders to report to—our *Kommandant*. I was half terrified, for that man under whom I was to serve is a sort of demigod in my country. He is an ace of aces, with thousands of tons of Allied ships to his credit."

Lane nodded, calling to mind the bandaged, gaunt form of the man. "It's easy to understand that he would have been a great commander."

"WOULD have been...?" A shadow crossed the boy's face. "*Ach*, but of course. It is hard to believe he no longer lives. He is—was—a great man, in body and mind. But terrible. I don't know what I expected of him. I found him a still-faced giant, with burning eyes."

"For a few months after I reached Wilhelmshaven, we took short cruises out from the base, and on one of them, into the Irish Channel, we sank the Cardiff Castle."

"The—Cardiff Castle!"

"Yes, *mein Herr*. The hospital ship. Everyone knows she was carrying troops. According to the Articles of War, we were justified. But—for nights after that I had no sleep. We saved as

(Continued on page 33)

Caged Songbird

The story of a man who knew what

HE WAS the sort of man that quite superior women are apt to marry in moments of pity or of desperation. But pity is a mood that passes; so does desperation when you're young and healthy, and lovely enough to set up strange disturbances in every man your husband introduces to you. So nobody was surprised when the news got about, after they'd been married a couple of years, that Paula was divorcing him.

Certainly her old friends weren't surprised—the music students she had known before Gilbert Mayhew turned her into a suburban housewife; still less her new friends, whom she'd been playing around with since she met Harrington; nor her husband's friends—Pelham commuters, mostly, or men from the office. But even less surprised than his friends or her friends were their friends—the ten or twenty people around New York who had known Gil and Paula at college, back in the Corn Belt. They had never understood why she threw herself away on him.

Of course he'd always been crazy about her; but plenty of men had been crazy about Paula in college—men of more consequence than Gil Mayhew, who belonged to a second-rate fraternity, won his letter in a minor sport, and never made much impression on anybody but his professors in the law school. Whereas Paula was always getting elected May Queen, or president of the women's Panhellenic or most beautiful girl on the campus. Her figure was like a statue and her face had a clear-eyed, placid beauty. Only at rare intervals did she seem subtle, elusive, unsatisfied; and only Martha, her roommate, knew that those were the times when Paula was dieting. She was queen of the campus; wherever she went men swarmed about her, and Gil Mayhew never got much nearer than the outskirts of the crowd.

BUT it was different in New York, where she was only one of the horde of music students living in furnished rooms in the West Seventies. Her teacher conceded that she had a voice, but didn't like the way she used it; and her father's life insurance would all be spent before she was ready for her debut. So she worked and skimped, and was lonesome and unhappy. She wished she were a Russian or a Jewess; New York didn't seem to appreciate the corn-fed type. No doubt the town was full of the sort of men she would have liked to know, but she never met them; and the men who tried to pick her up in the intermissions at Carnegie Hall concerts, when everybody went out to smoke on the stairs, didn't appeal to her at all.

Nobody realized that she was the late queen of the campus, and she was in danger of forgetting it herself. Her college friends who had settled in New York seldom saw one another; they were all busy getting their start and as depressed as she was by the contrast between recent splendor and present obscurity. She saw a good deal of Martha, who had married Pete Anderson on commencement night and come East with him; but Pete was working for forty dollars a week and Martha was keeping house in three rooms and getting ready for an unpremeditated baby. They were too absorbed in their own affairs to give much comfort to Paula.

One night Pete remarked that he'd

run into Gil Mayhew, who seemed to have a pretty good job with one of those big Wall Street law firms.

"Gil Mayhew?" said Paula vaguely. "Oh, yes. I remember."

BUT she didn't remember well enough to recall his name when she saw him on—of all places—the stairs of Carnegie Hall, where she was smoking in the intermission at a Philharmonic concert. (And if you think that was the long arm of coincidence, you don't know Gil Mayhew.) She only knew that somewhere she'd seen that stocky figure, that trustworthy-looking face—somewhere on the outskirts of a crowd, back home. So she went to him, both her hands outstretched.

"Oh, hello!" she said, smiling. "How lovely to see you!"

He'd expected something like that, and had rehearsed his reply; but face to face with her he could only gulp, and turn red and cling to her hands. By now his name had come to her.

"Pete Anderson was speaking of you only the other night, Gil. He said you had a fine job." Gil looked as if it called for apology.

"I'm with a good firm, at least. . . . How about you, Paula? You look wonderful, of course. But you seem—different, somehow."

"Different?" She knew she was, but—"How do you mean, Gil?"

In fact she seemed thinner; but he perceived that to say so would imply a time when she had seemed less thin.

"You're more—sophisticated," he said. (Useful word.) "You look almost—almost Russian." (Nothing could have pleased her more.)

"I've been through a good deal this past year," she said obscurely. "Oh, Gil—weren't we children, back in college?"

"Not you! You were always—well—always Paula."

Looking into his eyes, she knew that for him she was still the May Queen. . . . People were trooping past them, going back to their seats.

"I'm standing up," she said, "in the top balcony. And you—?"

"I was standing up downstairs. Suppose—" His daring almost choked him. "Suppose we stand up together, and go out to eat afterward."

So they stood up together. . . . That night Toscanini finished his program with the Liebestod and, as usual, all but finished his more emotional hearers. When it was over Gil and Paula found themselves clinging to each other, limp and shaking. . . . Long afterward, she supposed that had really begun it. Weeks passed before he even kissed her, but that first day the music broke down a barrier; the man with whom you've shared a warm bath of emotion is no longer on the outskirts of the crowd.

THEY went to eat at Baldroni's—their first date—and she ate three pieces of pastry. (Of late she'd been living mostly on coffee and rolls, trying to make the life-insurance money last longer.) Martha would have jeered at that indulgence; but Gil Mayhew only beamed and seemed glad the divine creature was getting the nectar and ambrosia she needed.

Before long she was dining with him two or three times a week; but don't get the idea that there was anything headlong about their courtship. That wasn't Gil Mayhew's way; he laid one brick on another, with plenty of mor-



tar between. The first time he kissed her she had to start it—and wondered afterward why she had done that; she hoped he wouldn't think she was taking him seriously. But she knew it must look as if she were taking him seriously when she brought him to call on Pete and Martha one evening.

"I suppose you think it's queer, my trailing around with him," she apologized to Martha as they powdered their noses. "In college, he was—"

"Less than the dust beneath your chariot wheels? Yes, but we aren't in college any more. I wish Pete could remember that; cutting the office when you've got a

That night Paula cooked the dinner; it was excruciating torment, since she wouldn't dare do more than nibble at it



The Blind Commander

Continued from page 13

many as we could. Believe that! But there were others. Too many others. . ."

The careful voice faltered, fought for control, broke.

Lane laid a hand over the German's. "Go on." He marveled at the strength that permitted the boy to talk, made him talk.

"*Lieber Gott im Himmel*—that night! I never forgot it; the screams and the crashing waves. It was war. I hated it. Hated it! But when orders came for a long cruise into the North Atlantic, I tried to forget, and to make myself into an automaton for the good of the men under me. We stood out to sea from Wilhelmshaven last September. Now it is—April, *nicht wahr*? It is hard to keep track of passing time."

THE American stared. "You can't mean you have been away from your base for seven months?"

"Seven months—or seven centuries. I hardly know."

"But how on earth. . . ?"

"We have not been cruising all that time. For an eternity . . . but I will tell you. Less than a week after we left Wilhelmshaven we fell afoul a dusty little enemy freighter just at twilight. She seemed harmless enough, and when we came to the surface and sent a warning shot over her bow, her crew took to the boats in panic; then we closed in to sink her with gun fire. But with our first shell, down went false ports which had disguised her guns, up went her war ensign, and blazing hell broke loose. She was a Q-boat—a deliberate lure for submarines.

"Her shells began snarling around us. The U-boat reeled and all the lights flashed out. I was below in the control room when the battle began, but the Kommandant was on the bridge, and I heard a shell explode almost overhead. I went up through the hatch to see what I could do, while the engineer threw on the whole speed of the engines and we raced away.

"The Kommandant lay crumpled on the bridge. He had been struck by a flying piece of steel, and he lay there staring ahead with empty eyes. He was talking to himself. 'For the Fatherland!' he was saying. 'For the Fatherland! . . .'" The withered hand clenched spasmodically under Lane's grasp.

"Steady, Lieutenant!"

"All right now, mein Herr. We got away. A gaping hole in the hull and two more through the conning tower were the only injuries to our ship itself, but they put us in the almost impossible position of having to run the North Sea blockade on the surface, while in a heavy sea that hull shot would sink us. Our navigation officer had been killed. More than that, our radio had gone out of order the third day out from port, and we'd no way of calling for help.

"But all that was more bearable than the agony of our commander. . . There was nothing we could do for him, but his will was stronger than death.

"At noon there was an officers' council in the mess-room. Our only choice, we decided, was to surrender—or to go down in the first storm.

"While we were still laying plans, we sighted a small ship bearing down to port. I set our course to cross hers, and sent the command, 'Full Ahead' to the engine room, then ordered a man below to destroy our confidential log. The white flag was ready at our bow.

"As we drew a little closer, I made out through the glasses that she was a Canadian freighter, and quite obviously

had not sighted us yet. We were all so intent on watching her that none of us looked around when the bow hatch lifted behind us. And until we heard his huge voice roaring, 'We do not surrender! Make ready to capture that ship!' not one of us suspected that—the Kommandant stood with us on the deck.

"Mein Herr, you cannot know how he looked! But he held his tortured body erect, and he took command. Through all his pain he must have heard some echo of our plans and demanded details from one of the crew."

Involuntarily Lane glanced at the motionless, blue-clad body beyond the other cots. Small wonder death had been powerless to take that man wholly captive!

The brittle voice went on tensely: "It was madness, sheer madness! But his will held us spellbound. We tore down the white flag, ran up the war ensign and sprang to our posts, and at the very instant that the freighter sighted us we let go our first shell.

"Don't damage her hull," the Kommandant ordered. 'Aim for the superstructure and the guns.' So that was the plan, we thought. To capture the freighter intact, sink our U-boat, and take our chance on riding safe through the blockade aboard a seaworthy ship rather than a crippled submarine.

"There was never a madder, wilder battle. Our men, struck with new hope, fought like fiends. Small wonder she was willing, at last, to surrender. Her decks and superstructure were matchwood, and her whole after-end a charred waste.

"The grimy crew stood about in knots on the decks, waiting for us coolly enough as we came over the side with Lugers ready, and they stared curiously at our Kommandant. I thought he would order them all locked in the forepeak, to be taken with us as prisoners of war on our run through the blockade, but, sagging between two of our men, his great blank face turned to the prisoners, he ordered, 'Make ready the lifeboats.'

"I tried to protest. 'Surely we could take them with us to Wilhelmshaven, sir?' I suggested.

"We are not returning to Wilhelmshaven," he told me. And then he gave his instructions. We were to take the U-boat in tow of the captured freighter (which was named Phoenix) and make for an island off the coast of Greenland. One that he knew from his schoolship days. There, we could repair the damage that the Q-boat had done us, he said. The Phoenix would serve as an emergency relief boat, if heavy seas should swamp the submarine during the journey, and her galley would supply enough extra rations for the trip.

"IT WAS the idea of a madman—or a genius. With our damage repaired, we would be able to submerge and would stand a far better chance of running safely through the North Sea. Despite the hazards of that long trip, the idea sounded tenable. But, logical or illogical, we had no choice but to obey.

"We reached the island safely. A week; two weeks. I don't know. It was an inhospitable place, bitter with Arctic winds, but it served our purpose and our first days there were not bad.

"The chief engineer directed the repair work, but the Kommandant himself drove us at it until officers and men were working side by side in a sort of frantic race against time—time and the Arctic winter.

"Time and again, with passing days, (Continued on page 34)

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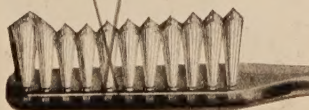
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Pro-phy-lac-tic

(Continued from page 33)

we tested the makeshift patches only to find they were not water-tight and we had to start again. With the freighter riding there at anchor, ready to take us off, it was a supreme test of the Kommandant's power that he could hold us at all. But I had seen black looks among the men, and I had seen knots of them, clustered together, melt apart when I approached.

"And then one day, when a test of the hull patch sent a trickle of water seeping into the air tank, the mutiny broke loose. One of the torpedo men—a broad-shouldered bull of a man—strode to the Kommandant where he stood silent on the deck of the Phoenix. 'We're through!' he shouted, half hysterically. 'We're going home on the freighter. Do you want to come with us, or be left here?'"

I STARTED forward, but the Kommandant only turned his stony, scarred face toward the men. "The lieutenant will give you your orders," he said. "The torpedo man pressed in closer, crazily. 'Ja? Well, I'm not taking orders any more. You're not God A'mighty. You're a blind old man...'"

"The Kommandant dropped one hand to his side and shot toward the voice, and the man dropped to his knees. A bright thread of blood crept down from the corner of his mouth. Then the Kommandant faced down the deck. 'Does anyone else want a hearing?' he demanded, and the men cringed away. The rebellion died there, and for the days that followed we obeyed him in a stupor of exhaustion. It wasn't fear alone that held us, but a sort of awe for the greatness of his will.

"He suffered with us. He went hungry when rations had to be cut low, and at the end he worked side by side with us, until one day—it must have been early in November—the work was tested again. We stood on the shore, waiting for the report, and we cheered like maniacs, with tears coursing down our cheeks, when the engineer cried, 'All tight, sir!'"

"One more day would be needed for tuning up the engines and charging the batteries, and then... 'Day after tomorrow, we will stand out to sea!' the Kommandant told us, and that night we all found the sleep of exhaustion. The next morning—a bitter cold one—some of us went ashore, to take our farewell of Starvation Island, and the helmsman and I climbed the ragged cliff which formed one side of the gateway at the harbor mouth. Then we learned the truth: the harbor mouth was a mass of ice! We were prisoners on Starvation Island."

The tense voice broke on a sob. "Ach Gott, I had been dreaming of Christmas at home—butter cookies and shining trees, and candles in windows... There, I am sorry I wander! My head feels very tired—One of the men went overboard, quietly, that night. The rest of us envied him a little, but we were too numb to feel any pain.

"We fired all but one of our torpedoes at that barrier. They were wasted. The ice was too strong!"

"Since then, until three days ago, there has been little worth the telling. Through all these endless months we have been huddling in the cabins of the Phoenix. We have lived on quarter rations from the freighter's galley, with a few limpets and once a seal. All the time, the Kommandant has driven us at a hundred crazy tasks—polishing brass, scrubbing decks, fishing through the ice. I suppose he was trying to keep us sane. But one by one the men have dropped off, from exposure or prostration or disease or hunger.

"Through all the black eternities of nights streaked with the northern

lights, we've crouched together for warmth and babbled about the war and how it would be going. And every night, I have seen the Cardiff Castle sinking, and its men drowning... again and again... And so we've waited, and that was all we could do. Except die.

"When the days finally began to grow a little longer, and the sun warmer, we crept out to watch the barrier. About the early part of March we saw the first berg break off, but it must have been almost April before we tried to ram the ice with the bow of the Phoenix for the first time. A week later she broke through, and three days ago, very early in the morning, we took the submarine through the channel and stood out to sea.

"I was the only deck officer living, except the Kommandant himself, and I reported to him for instructions. I knew what they should be—down the North Sea and home. But he turned his face to me and he said, 'We have one torpedo remaining, Lieutenant?' I answered yes.

"Then suddenly his voice bit like a lash. 'We will go south, into the trade lanes,' he told me."

Lane's head lifted sharply, but the German's eyes were on something beyond. The careful voice went on. "I tried to protest. 'The men won't stand it, sir!' I warned him. 'They've been through enough!'"

"Call them together in the control-room," he said.

"So they came together, black and silent and starving. But, mein Herr, before they left, they were cheering him! It was the power of his will."

The American's voice came levelly, drugged with incredulity. "See here. You don't mean—you can't mean—that you turned south intending to torpedo a ship?"

"That was our plan. Just one swift blow, then home, covered with glory... We sighted our first quarry—this morning, very early."

Lane sat quite silent, dazed and sick. "You thought of firing on—us?" he demanded at length.

"We had our last torpedo trained on you."

"I see—Amusing little game. If fate—luck—something—hadn't intervened to blow your damn' ship to atoms, you'd have sunk us?"

"IT WAS not exactly fate that saved you, mein Herr." The blue eyes met his, feverishly. "I was at the periscope when your ship came over the horizon this morning, so clear-lined and—living. Heaven knows I wanted to strike that blow and be free to turn home. But suddenly I remembered the ghastly horror of the Cardiff Castle's sinking, and I knew I couldn't send this ship of yours to the bottom. I kept my place at the periscope, hardly breathing for fear of betraying you... It was uncanny, the way the Kommandant felt your presence. He stopped his pacing at my elbow, and demanded, 'You have sighted something, Lieutenant?'"

"I told him it was only a bit of cloud I had seen, but he ordered the helmsman to the periscope and turned full speed toward you. The crew went mad in their anxiety to overtake you. It meant home to them, you see. Then he turned to me. 'Lieutenant, you will go below and make the torpedo ready for firing.'"

"I was sick at heart with the whole business. 'That ship is scarcely worth a torpedo, sir,' I pleaded. 'Shan't we try for bigger game?'"

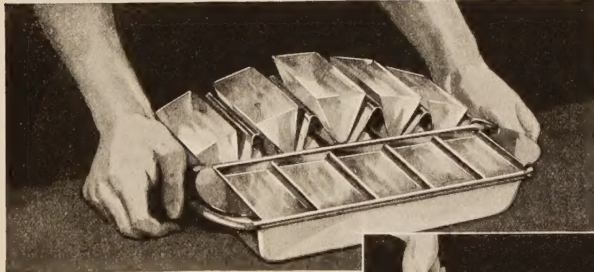
"Do as I say!" he answered coldly. "Ach, lieber Gott, what could I do but obey? I couldn't combat, single-handed, that terrible will. So I went below to the bow torpedo-room to make certain

(Continued on page 36)

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The Blind Commander

Continued from page 34

the torpedo was in its tube. I ordered out the crew to man the guns in case of need, and after a little I returned to where the commander waited beside the row of firing pins. Above the one for the first tube a light glowed in sign that all was ready. I unscrewed the safety cap. . . .

"And then I tried one last, desperate, hopeless plea. But it was useless. The Kommandant only stiffened. Then the helmsman reported, 'Coming into range, sir.' Your ship was stepping into our line of fire as though she had been under orders.

"Which tube is clear?" the Kommandant demanded of me.

"The first tube, sir," I told him. "I am standing by for orders."

FOR an awful fraction of a second he turned his empty eyes square on me as though he could look into my mind. Then he stepped to the firing board. "I will fire the shot myself," he said. "Helmsman, show me the pin."

"The man lifted his hand to the place. 'On the target, sir!' he reported an instant later.

"The Kommandant pressed the button. And that was our death warrant."

The boy caught a shallow breath, and his next words came tumbling as though a dam had burst. "That 'Ready' signal—it was a lie! I had changed the interlocking devices to flash it so. But I had left the sea-door of the torpedo chamber tight closed, and the war-head of the torpedo struck that steel barrier before ever it left the tube! God knows why I did it! I suppose it was the Cardiff Castle—but they've their revenge now, those drowned men. I'm a traitor, a murderer. . . ." The voice broke on a racking sob. "I've killed the men who served under me, and I—I—live!"

Jeremy Lane lifted an expressionless face and closed his hand over the boy's shoulder. "Has it occurred to you that wars sometimes end?" he asked.

"... end?" The boy grew immobile as a statue under his touch. Only his eyes seemed to be alive. "You don't mean. . . ."

"The Armistice was signed last November, Lieutenant."

For the length of a dozen heartbeats they held each other's eyes, the German and the American.

"Peace. . . ."

"For almost half a year."

"Peace!" It was an incredulous cry, and into it seemed to go every vestige of strength from the weary body. The voice sank to a breath. "Then if we had torpedoed your ship. . . ."

"You would have committed an unspeakable crime. Were you insane, all of you, not to think of that possibility?"

Stark horror brushed the boy's face. Gropingly he whispered, "I don't know. . . I don't know. November, you say? Then all those months on the island. . . ." He shuddered. "Mein Gott, we must have been mad! Mad! . . . the Kommandant. . . all of us. We had no room in our minds for any word but 'War.' To think that we almost sank a ship. . . ."

"And that you gave your life to prevent it, boy."

Slowly, almost imperceptibly, his lips softened from agony to prayer, as though the words had been a benediction. "You think what I did was not treason?"

"It was a miracle."

"Peace!" The shadowy voice caressed the word. "I can't—quite believe it. Not yet. The end—it was sudden? A break in the lines, and all over?"

"That was the way of it."

"And we lived through—that day—without knowing! Tell me, my friend, has the Fatherland been generous in victory?"

"Vic. . . ." Lane caught back his exclamation. "Your country has been so generous," he answered steadily, "that not even the conquered nations can complain."

A SMALL, gay smile touched the pallid lips of the lieutenant; a smile at once eager and vague, as though the blue glance had already been fixed on a point a little beyond anything that Jeremy Lane could see. After a moment he murmured, "Herr Kommandant, I beg to report. . . the Armistice. . . ."

The thin right hand stirred, lifted a little; perhaps in the beginning of a salute.



"My dear, I had no idea she was so strong!"

George Shellhase

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